

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Marion Barry 1978 Mayoral Primary Campaign Oral History Project
Interview with Patricia Seldon
Conducted on August 9, 2017 by Betty King

Pat Selden came to the District in 1951 and worked at various jobs in the federal government, including a stint in the White House. After the first home rule election in 1974, she joined Councilmember Barry's staff. In 1979, when Barry became Mayor, she became his valued Executive Assistant and the gatekeeper to the Mayor's office.

BK: Today is August 9th, 2017. My name is Betty King and I'm talking with Pat Seldon.

Pat, are you a native Washingtonian, or did you come here from elsewhere?

PS: Oh, no. I was born in Boston, Mass. I came down to Washington with a girlfriend, fell in love with Washington.

BK: What year was that?

PS: Nineteen fifty-one, I think. Yeah, approximately '51. I got a job with – I took a test, they wrote me and told me I had a job with the Department of Commerce, so I immediately told my mother I was moving and moved down. I had a friend down here. Actually, it was my girlfriend's aunt, who lived in Northeast Washington. So, I came, stayed with her, then my mother decided to come down, and then she got an apartment and I moved in with her. That's how I got here. Haven't left, other than I did live in Columbia, Maryland, for a while, and now I'm in Annapolis. I've been permanently in Annapolis for about twenty-two, three years.

BK: And at one point before you went to work for Marion, you were working at the White House, were you not?

PS: Yes, I worked several jobs. I started at Commerce, then I went to Air Force at the Pentagon, then I worked for a short while at HEW with Eunice Shriver and her assistant. She was involved with the mental retardation committee, something like that. And then I

went to State Department, I think, and then from State I went to the White House and then I went to Vice President Agnew's office. I've been all around.

BK: You have, indeed.

PS: And then Marion Barry. That was my last job.

BK: Now, how did you come to meet Marion and how did you come to go to work for him?

PS: I met Marion through Ivanhoe Donaldson [Barry's long-time friend and manager of the 1978 campaign]. When I left Agnew's office – no, somebody had called me and said Ivanhoe Donaldson was looking for somebody to work for him.

BK: And you'd known Ivanhoe?

PS: I did not know him. And actually, it was Valerie Pinson who knew Ivanhoe and who referred me to him. This is when I was in the vice president's office, and I decided I wanted to leave. It was working for Agnew. It was fine, but I didn't fit, really. So, I met Ivanhoe, and actually I worked for Ivanhoe for a short while and then he introduced me to Marion somewhere along the line.

BK: Where was Ivanhoe working at that point?

PS: Center for Community Change on 1000 Wisconsin, something like that, at the foot of Wisconsin in a little old, old building. He introduced me to Marion, and then when Marion decided to run Ivanhoe said, "Oh, you have to go work for him," or help him out or something like that. So, I did. I was still on Ivanhoe's payroll as such, but I contributed to Marion's first run for city council.

BK: But you weren't involved at all, therefore, in his run for the school board.

PS: No, I didn't know him.

BK: But so, it was the 1974 campaign for the city council.

PS: Yes. Right. And that's where I actually met Sybil Hammond and Audrey Rowe [both of whom were interviewed for this oral history] and some others who were involved in his running for the city council. I didn't meet you until he ran for mayor, I think.

BK: That's right. And Audrey, I think, when I interviewed her, said that she worked on his campaign in '78 but hadn't worked on his campaigns before.

PS: Right. I mean, I don't know. I didn't, as I say. I just –

BK: But you are there in '74.

PS: That was the first run for city council, yes.

BK: Right. And when he won, you became his –

PS: Yeah, Ivanhoe went to work for the government, and did –

BK: Ivanhoe was his chief of staff, was he?

PS: I'm trying to think. I don't know if Ivanhoe went on the payroll or not. I did, and Ed Meyers and –

BK: Ed, I think, was the committee clerk.

PS: Yes, Ed was, Gerry McCartrey, and me. I don't know if Sybil was there or not. I forget. I mean, I met Sybil when he ran for the council, but I can't remember if she –

BK: If she came on staff?

PS: Yeah. I think she did, but I'm not sure. I don't remember. And then, of course, I stayed with him until I retired, from there to –

BK: Which was in what year?

PS: Eighty-eight, something like that.

BK: That early? Did you?

PS: Uh-huh.

BK: Goodness, I'd forgot that. Okay. So, he ran in '74 and you went to work for him, then he won, he got the short straw when the council drew straws to see who got two-year and four-year [terms].

PS: Right.

BK: He got the short straw, so he ran again in '76.

PS: Uh-huh.

BK: And you continued to work in his office?

PS: Yes.

BK: And then in '78, you also stayed in his office but had quite a close relationship with what was going on over in the campaign, as I recall.

PS: Right, and that's how I met a lot of the people, but they were the workers. I was in the council and was not allowed, actually, to work, campaign for anybody.

BK: Right. But still, you were liaison with Sybil and Lucille, who were doing his scheduling and stuff like that.

PS: But that's when he became mayor.

BK: Well, also when he was – certainly his schedule for the campaign –

PS: Oh, okay.

BK: – must have been – I mean –

PS: Lucille, I didn't know Lucille – who was there then? I don't remember.

BK: Well, she did – not at the beginning of '78, but she came to town and she and Sybil were doing his scheduling during the last months of the campaign.

PS: Campaign, okay. Lucille was [Barry's campaign press secretary] Florence Tate's sister, and I guess Florence probably suggested she come up here and work for Marion.

BK: Yeah, and she did. And of course –

PS: Come up here from – where was she living at the – Memphis or Nashville?

BK: Something like that. And so, in '78, we won, and you then moved up as – you were, what, executive assistant to –

PS: I think that was the title, yeah. Executive assistant to the mayor.

BK: What were your duties as the executive assistant?

PS: Well, initially, a little bit of everything. I was, quote, supposed to oversee the schedulers. I mean, they basically worked on their own, but I worked closely with them. You know, composing letters for him and trying to keep the office moving along, and 50,000 other things that came up that you get involved with. You might have a, quote, job description for purposes of deciding grade level or whatever, but you don't necessarily, in a job like that, 100 percent stick to that. You do that plus –

BK: Oh, everything.

PS: – 50,000 other things. Right.

BK: Anything that needed to be done.

PS: Exactly, and I think that's how I would classify what I did. A little bit of everything, really.

BK: Yeah, you were the gatekeeper, too, to a great extent.

PS: *Washingtonian* magazine interviewed several people who were, they called them gatekeepers, who were at the boss's door deciding who could go in and who couldn't and that kind of – but you really were not. I mean, some people, you'd look up and there they were, "Oh, go on in," or not. Or you would let him know Betty King is here to see you, and 99 percent of the time you went in.

BK: Might have to wait.

PS: Oh, right, right, while he's talking on the phone probably. But anyhow, as I said, the *Washingtonian* did an article about gatekeepers in Washington, and I tried to get the magazine but I can't because I don't remember when it was. But it's not important.

BK: It was probably during the first few years of the administration.

PS: Maybe, maybe.

BK: Now I want to turn back the clock a bit, and as I told you before we started, I'd like you to talk about what happened when the Hanafi Muslims took over the District Building. Just start out if you can by talking about who they were and what they did, and then what happened to you.

PS: I don't think I can give background necessarily about who they were. I know they had a house on 16th Street Northwest. We say upper 16th Street, not toward downtown. I really didn't know anything about the Hanafis till –

BK: Neither did I.

PS: – that incident. I was at my desk and Marion was out to lunch and he was supposed to be back at I think two o'clock. He had a council meeting at that time. All of a sudden, I heard gunshots and someone came running – I'm not 100 percent sure. I'm trying to recreate what happened. Someone came running and said there was some men out there with guns and they were outside of [Council chairman] Sterling Tucker's office, and then they went into Sterling's office and I know they wounded one of – LaValle – I forgot her name, one of his secretaries, and Carmen – I forgot her last name. She was in Sterling's office. And at this time I guess it was close to two o'clock, and Marion, of all times was coming back approximately on time for his meeting. I think as he got off the elevator is

when he got struck. I think that's how it went. I was in the back with a coworker, Ed Meyers, and when we heard all this noise we went into Marion's office and pushed, I think a chair, I don't think we did the desk, against the door. We could call out, so we started calling out to find out what was going on, because our office was quite a way from Sterling's office, so we didn't see anything.

BK: Now, and Sterling's office was right up near the elevator corridor.

PS: Yes. Right.

BK: And then all of the councilmembers' offices went back towards the back of the building from there.

PS: Right. And Marion's office was close to the rear. I think there was just one office in back of us. So anyhow, we found out that there were gunmen in Sterling's office. I didn't know who they were, and whoever I was talking to, whoever I called – I don't remember – didn't know either. But as the day wore on, we learned more what happened, and we heard also that Marion had been shot and taken to the hospital. So, this happened approximately two o'clock, and we didn't get out until about thirteen hours later, I think. It was in the morning. And I went home, and I forgot who drove me home, and I just stayed up all night, I was so tense. The next morning, some people came over and we just sat and talked. I don't know when I went to sleep. You know, the adrenaline was just –

BK: Of course.

PS: And it was pretty scary at the time. I mean, I think back now, I don't think I was completely afraid, because I thought this closed door with the chair against it –

BK: Was going to protect you? (Laughter)

PS: But I do remember Ed and I hid under Marion's desk. We figured in case they opened the door, we weren't just right there. You know, they probably could see us, but you don't think like that at that time. And I know somebody ordered food and I think the fire truck with their ladder brought food up to the –

BK: Really?

PS: Uh-huh, so we had something to eat, and I don't remember –

BK: By this time, I guess you'd opened your door and you were talking to the other people who were back there?

PS: I think so. Yes. In fact, I do remember now, much later, several hours later, we talked to somebody on the phone. Well, maybe they came around and knocked on the door and said they were whoever. And I guess we hesitated, but someone on the phone told us that the police or whatever would be coming around, and put us all in the back of that area. And so, when they brought the food, they just dropped it in that area. I have no idea what we ate or drank. I really don't remember. But I know there was something to eat. And so, we all stayed back there until they had cleared the front of the Hanafis and we were escorted out. I don't remember how many people were back in that area. I don't remember. Quite a few. Sybil, in the meantime, she –

BK: Two o'clock in the afternoon, most people would have been back from lunch and working, getting ready for the council session.

PS: Uh-huh. And I remember Sybil was out in the street, because I – she didn't have a cell phone. Oh, later I learned she had walked up to the building to come back and saw all this commotion, of course, and I'm sure other people, the same, coming back and

wondering what's going on. In fact, the police probably wouldn't even let you enter the building at that point.

BK: Oh, no. Certainly not after Marion had come in and been shot.

PS: Right. And the firemen came, put a ladder up to the – what floor? Fourth floor? Fifth floor?

BK: Fifth floor. It was the top floor, I think the fifth floor, yeah.

PS: Yeah. Put a ladder to the window and carried him down. I can still see that picture in my mind, because he was strapped onto this ladder some kind of way, and he was waving to people. (Laughter)

BK: I know. He was giving media interviews as he was being put in the ambulance.

PS: Right. I think the next day, the picture in the paper was him waving, and strapped some kind of way.

BK: I think they had him strapped in some kind of a – I don't know. Something that –

PS: Like a stretcher type thing.

BK: Yeah, like a stretcher, but metal or something.

PS: Right.

BK: So, he was waving and giving interviews to the media.

PS: Uh-huh, he was. I mean, I learned about it afterward, and as I say they had his picture in the paper, coming down, being carried down that ladder, and waving.

BK: What do you think was the impact of Marion's election and his serving as mayor on the history of the District of Columbia?

PS: Oh, he had a huge impact. As you know, and most people who have been here for at least twenty-five or more years, of the area at 14th and U Street, putting up one of the government buildings at 14th and U, which was called the Reeves Center.

BK: Yeah, I worked there for a time.

PS: And I think that started the revitalization of U Street.

BK: No question. Definitely, it did.

PS: Uh-huh. And I think a lot of people thought he was crazy to even try to do something right there, but it changed the whole area. And now, U Street just did a complete turnaround, brought businesses, apartments, a lot of the housing along U Street and the streets off of U, 13th, 14th, 15th, I guess, and going the other way, at least 9th or 8th or something, that whole area has changed completely.

BK: It's amazing.

PS: New condos, and not only on U, but the streets that intersected U Street. And now, I don't go there that much, but it's very expensive, some of those condos.

BK: Exactly. And the nightlife, the Millennials just flock there for the nightlife.

PS: That's right. You read about it all the time.

BK: Ben's Chili Bowl is practically the only thing that remains.

PS: I was just getting ready to say, Ben's Chili Bowl expanded and now they have the new mural on the wall with – who is there? Jim Vance [TV anchor], I guess, and – was he on there? I think he was.

BK: Barack Obama. I think they removed Bill Cosby. I'm not sure.

PS: Well, he was a good friend of theirs.

BK: Oh, indeed he was.

PS: But, you know, sometimes things happen.

BK: Yeah, and of course it's particularly interesting that Marion was the catalyst for the revitalization of that area because he was so involved in trying to curb the violence after Martin Luther King's assassination that erupted in that whole area.

PS: Uh-huh. And a lot of people didn't agree with him at all, but he stuck to his guns and said, "No, we're going to put one of our government agencies at that corner," which he did. And that really was the catalyst for that whole area, I think.

BK: Oh. But, you know, there are so many ways in which he changed the history of the District, his insistence on employees living in the city and minority participation in contracting, and many people say that he single-handedly created a black middle class in the District of Columbia.

PS: That's what I've heard. Not me. (Laughter) And also, he hired a lot of relatively young people to work in his government as directors and assistant director and so forth, and a lot of people that I know came to Washington specifically to work in DC government because of Marion Barry. And I could name several who have moved on to, as they say, greater things. Actually, I saw Artis Hampshire-Cowan the other day. She was in Annapolis, and we were talking about old times. And how she happened to come here. She was interviewed by Mary Lampson [assistant in Mayor Barry's office] and got a job, I think she worked in DCRA [Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs]. I don't know if that was her initial job in the DC government or not. But then she went on to Howard University as whatever to the president. I don't know her title. But that's one example of someone who –

BK: And there are literally hundreds of them. Not to mention the impact that he had on young people.

PS: Well, that's what I'm saying. A lot of young –

BK: I mean really young people, through his Mayor's Leadership Institute and the summer job program and so forth.

PS: Oh, right. Exactly, exactly. I think, don't they still have that program?

BK: Indeed. They call it the Marian S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program. You know, at his funeral there were literally hundreds of young people, people who had been –

PS: Right, in the youth leadership.

BK: – in the youth leadership and so forth and in the summer youth employment program, saying, "He gave me my first job."

PS: That's right.

BK: In fact, somebody who works here [in my condo] heard that I had worked for Marion Barry and he came to me and he said, "He saved my life. I would have ended up in jail and he gave me my first job." And you hear that all the time.

PS: And they loved it, and it was, what, about a six-week program, approximately?

BK: Exactly.

PS: Yeah. We had one of the young people in the mayor's office. I can see this fellow now. Young, happy-go-lucky young man, cute as a button. Probably way overweight, but he was just a sweetheart. But he was – anything you asked him to do, he was so happy to be in there. And making whatever they made. They didn't make a lot. I mean, this was a long time ago.

BK: No, but it was very prestigious to be part of the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute.

PS: Exactly. And they also made friends with others in that program, and I'm sure some of them are still good friends to this day.

BK: You know, that's the extraordinary thing, also, about the 1978 campaign, is the friendships that were made there.

PS: You and me.

BK: You and me – are alive and well today, and it's almost forty years.

PS: Exactly. Well, that's how Sybil and I met, and we became close because our birthdays are two days apart.

BK: I know.

PS: But we're very good friends, and her family. In fact, I saw her last night, she and Hampton, her husband. But we all made, I think, lasting friendships, and mainly because, aside from enjoying the people you worked with, but we worked long hours and sometimes seven days a week, and anytime you're thrust into a situation like that you automatically become fairly close.

BK: Yeah. Indeed.

PS: You can't help but.

BK: Well, and in a sense there was a sort of feeling of crusading, certainly about the '78 campaign, because nobody thought we could win.

PS: That's right. I can remember that campaign very clearly. His campaign office was above the fur company?

BK: It was the old Miller Fur store.

PS: Miller's Fur, right.

BK: On, what was it? F Street? G Street?

PS: G, I think.

BK: I think you're right, it was on G Street.

PS: Yeah. Because F was the main, and I think it was in back, kind of. The street, you know. Yeah, G Street.

BK: Which has, of course, been redeveloped into – I don't know. I think the new Hecht Company is there or something or was there. Anyways, it was a funny little old building that didn't work very well, but it –

PS: It worked for us.

BK: It worked for us. And there was a feeling of, you know, us against the world. I don't care what they say, we're going to win, and we did.

PS: That's right, that's right. Narrowly. I remember the day after, we were in the office and of course he got scads of phone calls and lots of telegrams. I will tell you one incident. One day I was – I guess I had been doing whatever, answering letters, and he came out and I guess it was a period where I was just sitting there for two seconds, and he said, "What are you doing?" Something like that. And I said, "I'm answering all these letters. What do you mean, what am I doing?" (Laughter) It looked like I wasn't doing anything at that point. But he had scads of letters and I answered every single one of them, and they weren't reproduced or anything. I personally typed every single letter, to thank them for whatever they said in their letter.

BK: And that that point we didn't have computers where you could do a generic letter and make changes in it.

PS: That's right. No. That's right.

BK: You typed every letter.

PS: Every individual letter was typed specifically for that person, and he had scads of them.

And he asked me, what was I doing. Oh, I could have killed him. (Laughter) But I can remember that time very well.

BK: Yeah, and we had a lot more friends the day after the primary than we did before then.

PS: Oh, exactly, because everyone that called, “Oh, I’m so glad you won. I voted for you.” I told him, and he knew it himself, I said, “If everyone that said I voted for you voted for you, you would have won by several thousand instead of –”

BK: Thousands of thousands instead of like 3,000, yeah.

PS: Exactly. I don’t remember the margin.

BK: I think it was a third, a third, a third, except that our third was –

PS: A little bit more than the third.

BK: – 2 or 3,000 more than everybody else’s.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

BK: It was a very narrow victory.

PS: It was a narrow race, yeah.

BK: But it was miraculous compared to what the polls were saying.

PS: I can remember [Councilmember] Polly Shackleton supported, I think, Sterling [Tucker].

BK: She did, she did.

PS: And the night Marion won – and I forgot where the afterparty was, so –

BK: It was at the Harambee House Hotel.

PS: That’s right, Harambee House, and Polly came to the Harambee House.

BK: She and Bob [her husband] came to the Harambee House, I know.

PS: That's right, to congratulate. And Marion and Polly were super-duper close friends ever since.

BK: Oh, brother and sister.

PS: Exactly, exactly. But she was there, hugging Marion and everything, and even I said, "Ooh Polly, I'm so happy, we won, we won." And she nodded her head.

BK: I saw her too and I gave her a big hug. I think not everybody was like you and me, was willing to – you know, you and I were willing to forgive her –

PS: Oh, sure. Yeah.

BK: – immediately, because they were such close friends, but many people had trouble forgiving her.

PS: Well, you know, she had her reasons for supporting Sterling, I'm sure, over Marion.

BK: Well, she and Bob had been away all summer, because she was running unopposed, and she came back and [the pollster] Peter Hart and [her long-time political adviser] Lee Carty got a hold of her and said, "There's no way Marion can win. You've got to support Sterling."

PS: Oh, really?

BK: And so, they convinced her, whereas if she'd been here all summer and had seen the kind of operation that Marion was putting together and that he had so much support in her ward [3], she might well have made a different –

PS: Uh-huh. And she knew him very well on the council because their offices were adjacent. So, she saw him every day, several times a day, so she did get to know him fairly well.

BK: Oh, they were the best friends.

PS: That's right, and they talked about the legislation all the time. "Polly, what do you think?" Or she'd go to him. "Marion, I'm going to –" da-da-da, and, "What do you think?" And he said, "Fine, I'll support you," and back and forth.

BK: No, no, but they were absolutely in lockstep on the council.

PS: Exactly. Yeah.

BK: They were closest friends.

PS: Uh-huh. But anyhow, he won.

BK: And he forgave her and they continued to be best friends as long as she lived.

PS: That's right. That's right, exactly.

BK: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

PS: No, I can't think, unless you have questions you want to ask me, any more questions.

BK: No but thank you very much for participating in the oral history, and we couldn't do it without you. I'm glad I was able to get you.

PS: Well, I don't know about that. It's taken me a while to get here, but I'm here.

BK: Thank you very much indeed.

PS: Okay.

[End of interview]